<Book Reviews> The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity KAH SENG LOH, EDGAR LIAO, CHENG TJU LIM, and GUO-QUAN SENG Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 347p., with bibliography and index.

AUTHOR(S):

Huang, Jianli

CITATION:

Huang, Jianli. <Book Reviews> The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity KAH SENG LOH, EDGAR LIAO, CHENG TJU LIM, and GUO-QUAN SENG Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 347p., with bibliography and index.. Southeast Asian Studies 2013, 2(2): 432-434

ISSUE DATE:

2013-08

URL:

http://hdl.handle.net/2433/178392

public intellectual in BRR and IAIN) in what they see are ongoing processes of domination.

Jacqueline Aquino Siapno
Independent Scholar

Reference

Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity

Kah Seng Loh, Edgar Liao, Cheng Tju Lim, and Guo-Quan Seng
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 347p., with bibliography and index.

This book examines the history of the University Socialist Club (USC) at the University of Malaya (later renamed as University of Singapore) from 1953 to 1971 within the broad context of British decolonization, the global Cold War, and the making of the modern nation-states of Singapore and Malaya(sia). It is a timely product because the only substantive works on this important subject are a 1973 unpublished BA graduating thesis (Koh 1973) and the recent firsthand accounts in *The Fajar Generation* as edited by three former USC members (Poh *et al.* 2010). Moreover, it arrives at an opportune moment when the authoritarian politics of Singapore appear to be changing, with "untold stories" and "alternative narratives" being offered through a multitude of platforms to challenge the dominant state narrative of the Singapore Story as framed primarily by the elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew.

It is to the credit of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS, Singapore) to have provided the four young scholars with initial financial support and moral impetus to explore new ground in Singapore history (p. 12). It would have been even better if ISEAS had seen the project to its fruition and publication through its own internal publishing unit. Similarly, the authors have registered their share of difficulty in getting access to local primary source materials, especially government records, and their fresh archival findings were mostly excavated from foreign archives instead of the National Archives of Singapore (pp. 38–39). How they overcame these obstacles is testimony to the tenacity and skill of the history writing of the authors as they have indeed succeeded in putting together a volume rich in details and analysis.

The main body of discussion begins with the reluctant British approval for forming a political club within the nascent university as well as the *Fajar* arrests and sedition trial which elevated the

USC to its iconic political status. This is followed by several chapters delineating its activities to mobilize students across campuses in Singapore as well as those in Malaya and even among the international student fraternity. It was a mixed record of collaboration and contestation due to personality issues and ideological differences. The discussion also touches on the important divide as well as connectivity between the English-educated and Chinese-educated student activists. An introspective critique is then developed on how the intelligence and security agencies (especially the Special Branch which later morphed into the Internal Security Department), under the trope of international Cold War and local fear of communism and communalism, had constructed a problematic information order which became a primary tool for the emasculation of left wing politics. The next segment deals with the USC's involvement in the battle to merge and form Malaysia, the various security crackdowns, and the fight for university autonomy. The last substantive chapter on "Entwined Memories and Myths" brings the story to the present day by surfacing the claims and counter-memories of various actors on both sides of the political fence in their old age.

While the book serves up a useful chronological narrative (as fortified by an appendix on "Timeline of Events"), there is a laudable conscious effort throughout to transcend the details and to sieve out analytically a set of main trends and themes. Inserted in between the factual accounts are numerous passages of deep reflection and, in addition, even critique of sources (e.g. pp. 38–39, 154–158, 203, 234). However, the most important analytical device deployed is to package the complex developments under the sub-title "tangled strands of modernity." The struggle for a theoretical flavor through the theme of modernity is explicated in the introductory and concluding chapters and in fleeting references to Partha Chatterjee (pp. 25–27) and James Scott (p. 27). The connection between modernity and the forging of nation-state by the USC and its rivals comes across repeatedly and is clear enough. However, the usage and discussion of the term "multiple modernities" does not appear to be on the right track as it tends to slide towards being an equivalence of "multiple identities" instead of pointing out subtle non-Western features of Asia-situated modernity (pp. 28–30). Similarly, the reference to James Scott's "high-modernist ideology" as espoused in *Seeing Like a State* does not seem appropriate as his term actually goes beyond simple modernism and incorporates a misplaced grand utopian vision which would inadvertently bring about death and disruption to millions (such as the Great Leap Forward in China [see Scott 1998]). It is also a missed opportunity that the parallel concepts of "post-modernism" and "post-colonialism" have not been adequately handled. This would have facilitated a critique of the preponderant nation-state framework and of whether Singapore, with its attainment of independence and governance under the People's Action Party, has remained entrapped by the deep structure of colonial mentality and thus cannot be truly claimed to have ever transited into a "post-colonial" society.

On the balance, the book should prove to be a compelling read in terms of its rich factual details, fluent prose, thrusting analysis, as well as theoretical framing. It is a handsome contribu-

tion to extant scholarship on the history of the island city-state and places the English-educated student activism back into the limelight as the increasingly Anglicized society currently gropes towards a new style of politics.

Huang Jianli 黄坚立
Department of History, National University of Singapore

References

Koh, Tat Boon. 1973. University of Singapore Socialist Club, 1953–1962. Unpublished academic exercise, History Department, University of Singapore.

Poh, Soo Kai; Tan, Jing Quee; and Koh, Kay Yew, eds. 2010. *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the Politics of Postwar Malaya and Singapore.* Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

Scott, James. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.